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ABSTRACT

Generalizations about rural youth can be misleading as they are heterogeneous in their backgrounds, cultural heritage, values, and aspirations. This diversity is especially apparent when ethnic subgroups are examined. Black and Hispanic rural youth tend to have lower levels of achievement than white rural youth. This should be kept in mind when interpreting data from national studies giving results for all rural youth of a certain age group, as does the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP data show improved rural performance to national levels for some ages in science, reading, functional literacy, and social studies, with rural nine-year-olds apparently showing the most change. Other studies also indicate that rural academic achievement is on the upswing. Regulations attached to federal money often create problems for rural school boards and staff. Not only must programs be designed to meet federal guidelines, but often change is difficult because of barriers inherent in the organization of rural school districts. However, while many rural communities do not have the numerous resource people and facilities available to them which urban communities often have, they make up for this seeming lack with a spirit of commitment to and interdependence with their educative system. (CH)

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The Effects of the Rural School

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In the recent past, most literature characterizing rural

American schools does so in terms of what they lack--adequate staffing and equipment, financial resources, supportive services, diversity of course-work and programs, experience and training of teachers and administrative staff (Kuvlesky, 1976; Coward, 1978; Fratoe, 1978). Students in rural schools were found to be lacking in structural opportunities, both educational and occupational, as well as the cultural background which would make later attainment more likely (Crosby, 1978). Their achievement scores, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results from 1969-72 show them scoring lower on all measures than every group tested except "low metro"--students from low income urban areas (Fratoe, 1978).

This kind of "stereotype" persists into 1980. In "Federal Initiatives and Rural School Improvement: Findings from the Experimental Schools Programs," Robert Herriot (1980) says,

"Rural individuals, in comparison to their urban counterparts are more likely to:

- . be classified as functional illiterates
- . score lower on national assessment tests
- . attend public schools that expend less for instruction
- . first enroll in school at an older age
- . progress through school more slowly
- . complete fewer years of school and are less likely to:
 - . complete four years of high school or more

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- . receive vocational training
- . attend public schools with support services and personnel
- . plan to attend college
- . enter college
- . enroll in adult education"

However, these and other generalizations about rural youth can be misleading. As Kuvlesky (1976) has said, rural youth are heterogeneous in their backgrounds, cultural heritage, values and aspirations. In fact, they tend to be more like their urban ethnic group counterparts than like other ethnic groups within the rural milieu. That is, a black farmer in Alabama is likely to hold values and aspirations which are more similar to those of a black city-dweller of the same age cohort than to those of a white farmer in Alabama. The divergence would be even greater between that same black farmer and a white counter-part in Iowa or Colorado. This is especially true now that reverse migration is taking place in so many rural communities. From the "back to the earth" immigrant who tends to be younger, better educated, more idealistic and of a higher socio-economic level than other members of his new community, to the "boomtown immigrant" who tends to be of lower socio-economic status and more acceptant of the often chaotic effect of rapid, unorderly expansion on the rural environment, these additions to the population of rural communities can only add to their diversity (Ross & Green, 1979; Milet, 1979).

The diversity of the rural population is especially apparent when ethnic subgroups are examined. Even though most young people

across ethnic groups seem to have bought the "success dream" of high educational attainment and career preference (Cosby and Picon, 1979), black and Hispanic rural youth tend to have markedly lower levels of achievement than white rural youth (Crosby, 1968; Cosby and Picon, 1979; Fratoe, 1978). Cosby (1978) identified 15 areas of influence which enhance or hinder a person's chances for attainment later in life: ambition, self-concept, encouragement, social origins, intelligence, academic performance, occupational knowledge, consequences of discrimination, school effects, athletic participation, attitude development and early marriage and fertility. Not surprisingly, he found (1) a positive correlation between social origins, especially the advantages (if any) of parental status, and attainment, and (2) that youth who were encouraged to achieve early in life tend to attain more. Unfortunately, blacks not only tend to start out with fewer advantages, but they also have more difficulty in transmitting any advantages they gain to the next level of attainment. They are less likely to expect that they will be able to achieve what they aspire to and are thus less likely to act on their preferences (Cosby and Picon, 1979). Levels of attainment tend to be even lower for Hispanic rural youth, with 37% of the under 25 population being functionally illiterate (Fratoe, 1978). In light of these findings it is especially sad to consider that in studying the changes in aspirations for rural youth in the Deep South over a six year period, Cosby and Picon (1979) reported that the respondents' aspirations remained high even as opportunities diminished, with little indication of any basic realignment of preference levels with actual

possibilities for attainment.

These ethnic subgroups findings should be kept in mind when interpreting data from national studies which give results for all rural youth of a certain age group, as does the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The NAEP is designed to measure knowledge, skills and attitudes in 10 learning areas and to measure educational attainment over time. It consists of multiple-choice, open response and free response exercises, and measures the percentage of respondents at each age level who are able to answer a question or perform a task. Rural students were measured at ages 9, 13, and 17 years.

As Martin (1979) points out, of the children tested and reported in the sample, only 10% are from rural areas, and the data shows no breakdown by region, race, or socio-economic variables. Taken as a whole, the findings are encouraging. The baseline data trend was supported by the change data, which showed improved rural performance to national levels for some ages in science, reading, functional literacy and social studies. Rural nine-year-olds seemed to evidence the most change. In science, their change was statistically significant. In reading they evidenced a positive change while other age levels stayed the same. In social studies, nine-year-olds closed the gap between themselves and national levels. They showed a slight increase in knowledge, a significant increase in skills, and a decrease in performance on attitudes exercises. Although there were national declines in citizenship performance, rural students narrowed the gap between themselves and other students, with the changes for 13- and 17-year-olds showing statistical significance. When functional literacy was

tested in the spring of 1974, there was a positive change for 17-year-olds since 1971. In this area, rural students had changed most, coming up to national levels. In science it was found that rural students, especially 17-year-olds, tended to perform above the national level on practical "common sense" types of science exercises, while they performed below the national level on more academically oriented exercises. The 13- and 17-year-olds also narrowed the gap between themselves and the national level on social studies. Martin (1979) suggests that each set of exercises be examined at each level to determine specific strengths and weaknesses.

Easton (1977) did examine in depth the NAEP results in social studies for rural 13-year-olds. He fully reviewed their strengths and weaknesses in skill, knowledge and attitudes. He concluded that rural youth are more like the rest of the country in terms of the results than they are different. He also concluded that they are therefore receiving an "average" American education and that the "problems" of rural social studies education in general~i.e. difficulties of defining terms, agreeing on the meaning of results and the benefits of experiences.

Other studies indicate that rural academic achievement is on the upswing. The Canadian province of Alberta found that third graders in non-urban schools scored significantly higher province-wide on reading vocabulary and comprehension than their counterparts in urban schools (Clarke and others, 1978). The Southwest Regional Laboratory (1979) reported that when non-urban elementary school in 20 western states were provided with materials and technical assistance over a three-year period, 83% of the participating schools were able to

maintain or improve the level of learning in their remedial programs in reading and mathematics.

Gains in achievement for rural youth as a whole, while encouraging, must be interpreted carefully. It is likely that they represent more significant changes for white rural youth than for ethnic minority subgroups (Tweeten, 1979). These subgroups still need remedial programs, basic skills training and adult education (Cosby, 1978; Fratoe, 1978). Rural youth as a group need expanded support services, student retention programs, increased career and occupational information and training, and expansion of employment opportunities within the rural environment (Cosby, 1978; Fratoe, 1978; Tweeten, 1979; Cosby and Picon, 1979). With most rural areas having fewer resources in terms of facilities, staff and funding to provide the programs their youth so sorely need, (Fratoe, 1978) many areas find themselves turning to the federal government for supplemental monies.

Since federal money always has "strings attached," problems can arise with local boards and staff (Herriot, 1980). Not only must programs be designed to meet federal guidelines, but often change on any kind of large scale is difficult because of barriers inherent in the organization of rural school districts. According to Herriot, these include: insufficient means of obtaining information on instructional conditions within the district; dispersion of power among teachers, administrators and the community to the extent that the change process cannot be controlled by anyone; lack of consensus within the district and community about the kinds of changes needed; and inadequate feedback mechanisms for identifying and circumventing

barriers to implementation as they arise. In addition, some local boards and staffs are suspicious of "the feds" and would prefer that the federal government allow local boards to run their own schools and make their own decision (Edington and Conrad, 1980).

Some urban schools have apparently contended successfully with the mixed blessing of federal intervention. Chase (1978) reviewed 599 successful programs in high priority development areas such as action learning, cultural pluralism, basic skills, special education and school-community collaboration. A large proportion of the programs which were reported as successful by the 30 large cities involved were supported in part or wholly by federal funds. In fact, when analyzing the features which seemed to make programs successful, deferral funding was one of the combination of three which Chase mentioned. Most important of the three, however, was innovative and inspired local leadership. In success story after success story, positive local direction was the key factor. According to Chase "Program leadership is the dynamic factor which maintains the cutting edge through continuing staff development, through enlisting central administration and community support, and through continual adaptation to observed needs and preferences of students." The third success factor was the involvement of the community as resources. This involvement was characterized by the recruitment of professionals and volunteers to serve as counselors, tutors, instructors, and resource persons; by the establishment of part-time and full-time employment internships through business, medical and social service communities, government, and the visual and performing arts; and by drawing in local professional

and service groups to help develop an enriched learning environment for the schools.

The environments of rural schools are vastly different from those of urban schools, yet it seems that some guidance can still be taken from the successes of such urban programs. First, many rural communities, while they may not have the quantity of resource people and facilities available to them which urban communities often have, make up for this seeming lack with a spirit of commitment to and interdependence with their educative system. Community members often need only a little encouragement to become involved in a program, with the reassurance that what they have to offer is worthwhile. Secondly, in planning and implementing programs, staff in rural areas, overworked and underpaid as they may be, still are capable of the kind of innovation and inspiration which comprises a successful program. Witness to this fact are the many rural programs which are successful, the many staff members in rural schools who give time and effort "above and beyond the call of duty" to put together programs which provide meaningful experiences for learners. Often staff, too, just need encouragement from those who supervise or train them to use their creativity and enthusiasm to motivate those they work with.

Finally, with signs that federal agencies are becoming more aware of the components of a successful program—specifically the importance of local leadership—perhaps there is a new hope that local and federal interests can coincide more completely in the foreseeable future.

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